

Review of *Fire and Snow: Climate Fiction from the Inklings to Game of Thrones* by Marc DiPaolo (State University of New York Press)

by Alisa M. Schreibman | Book Reviews, Issue 9.1 (Spring 2020)

ABSTRACT Marc DiPaolo's *Fire and Snow* engages with the burgeoning 'cli-fi' genre which speculates on climate change themes and corollary effects. Through close examination of such diverse works as Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games*, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, and "low-culture" films *Snowpiercer* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*, DiPaolo both argues in favor of non-partisan collective action against climate change and explores broader public engagement with environmental themes. Primarily a survey text, *Fire and Snow* nevertheless provides considered analysis of the relationship between authors, producers, and consumers in the dissemination of cli-fi messaging in popular culture.

KEYWORDS cli-fi, climate, ecocriticism, fiction, film studies, literary studies, speculative fiction

Fire and Snow: Climate Fiction from the Inklings to Game of Thrones. By Marc DiPaolo. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018, 333 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4384-7045-0. US List: \$29.95.

With his most recent book, *Fire and Snow: Climate Fiction from the Inklings to Game of Thrones*, Marc DiPaolo joins Greta Thunberg in proclaiming, "No Planet B!" Of course DiPaolo's pitch has a more modest audience than the United Nations—scholars of literature and film, theologians, and philosophers—and he lacks legions of teenagers as his allies. But DiPaolo does marshal J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Margaret Atwood, Suzanne Collins, George R.R. Martin, and their cohort in making a powerful argument for non-partisan collective action against climate change. Instead of decades of climate science and rising sea levels, DiPaolo addresses the swelling volume of science fiction and fantasy dealing not with aliens and magic so much as pollution, melting ice caps, drought, and pandemics, or what is known as "cli fi."

DiPaolo, an assistant professor of English at Southwestern Oklahoma University, has published nine books and several edited volumes that survey terrain adjacent to his current work. In *Fire and Snow*, he expands the breadth of his subject matter, from pre-World War II British fantasy to contemporary American cli-fi, popular young adult and literary fiction, Hollywood film, and British television.

In DiPaolo's own words, *Fire and Snow* aims "to show how these popular franchises are recognized (or not recognized) by the broader public as climate fiction narratives offering

critical moral instruction on the urgency of conservation" (9). The book first argues, in the words of Margaret Atwood, that climate change is an *everything* issue; thus, cli-fi also explores issues of poverty, race, gender, sexuality, and religion. The book then follows I.Q. Hunter and Frederic Jameson in surveying popular works of "uneven quality" that may still offer "'little stabs of insight into . . . culture seething with repression and coming apart.'"1; however, DiPaolo also observes that Hollywood's focus on money-making action films leads to stripping literature of its cli-fi themes, producing instead films that *promote* violence, war, and exploitation.

DiPaolo thus engages his texts with a "marriage" of thematic criticism and ecocriticism, both deconstructionist modes of reader-response theory. Ecocriticism, especially strains enriched by ecofeminism, examines the relationship between text and physical environment, while thematic criticism permits grouping texts from disparate genres and media to examine the environmental theme (7). As DiPaolo acknowledges, this theoretical move can be at variance with the authors' intentions by putting meaning in the hands of the readers, but it is consistent with the overall project of examining how the "broader public" receives cli-fi themes in popular media.

The book is arranged into an introduction, eleven chapters, and an epilogue. Epigraphs from Leonard Peltier, *Game of Thrones*, and *Mockingjay* frame the argument, articulating climate change as a collective problem. DiPaolo's introduction on reclaiming enemy territory sets out the moral charge: fixing the environment requires an attitude change. The conclusion, which pits *Atlas Shrugged* against *Lord of the Rings*, asserts a solution in the homely ways of Tolkien's hobbits.

Chapters are grouped into interpretive chunks. The first three cover Christian stewardship and the legacy of Oxford's infamous Inklings literary group, notably Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Chapter 1 deals with the "cultural appropriation" of Tolkien and others by hawkish conservatives, covering the misuse of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey within texts like *Star Wars*. Chapter 2 revisits the oft-discussed Tolkien-Lewis friendship, focusing on their anti-fascism, and reads Tolkien's Middle-Earth as part of a "shared universe" with Lewis's space trilogy. Chapter 3 brings the Inklings into the present with *Doctor Who*, in which the Doctor is sometimes a Christ figure (Aslan), sometimes an angel (Gandalf), and always on the side of the trees.

The next two chapters cover the intersections of wealth, race, and climate change. Chapter 4 examines the Noah's ark solution: disaster capitalism and "magic lifeboats," or wishful-thinking technological solutions exclusively for the wealthy. Here, Mark Millar's *2012* joins *The West Wing* in a critique of Dominion theology, a strain of evangelical Christianity that believes humanity's role is to subdue rather than steward the earth. Exemplar texts for Chapter 5's discussion of race include Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan's *The Strain*, and Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium*.

Chapters 6–8 continue to examine intersectionality, but with a specific emphasis on dystopian post-apocalypse and the plausibility of revolt. In Chapter 6, DiPaolo tackles the Eden myth, the Fall, LeGuin's feminism, and St. Francis's Christian environmentalism. Chapter 7 explores the ecofeminist storytelling developed most thoroughly in the works of Margaret Atwood, in whose dystopias DiPaolo finds foreshadowing of current events, calling her a prophet. In Chapter 8, he addresses the outcomes of rebellion against dystopian regimes. While *Mad Max: Fury Road* shows a qualified success, *Snowpiercer*

depicts an utter failure. Umberto Eco's fourteen factors of Ur-fascism, or Eternal Fascism, provides the methodological background here.

Fire and Snow's final three chapters are prescriptive. In Chapter 9, DiPaolo reads Suzanne Collins as a liberal Catholic social justice warrior whose *Hunger Games* trilogy makes a subversive argument for radical, bottom-up empathy. Chapter 10 turns to *Star Trek* and *Game of Thrones* for examples of what DiPaolo calls (in an unfortunate stereotype-perpetuating phrase) "the Cowboy and Indian Alliance"—that is, uniting with historical enemies against the greater environmental threat. In the book's short concluding chapter, DiPaolo asks what comes next, likening the present to the then-unknown ending of the televised *Game of Thrones*. Here DiPaolo enlists Robert Crumb and Naomi Klein to emphasize the possibilities for collective action against an uncertain future.

With *Fire and Snow*, DiPaolo provides a remarkably cogent overview of this expanding genre. He is at his best when discussing Christian stewardship and radical empathy. Chapter 6, which juxtaposes Campbell's hero's journey as "the killer story" with Atwood's *MaddAdam* trilogy and St. Francis's *The Wolf of Gubbio* as "the life story" is especially strong (160–64). The book also treads new ground in Inklings-adjacent criticism, canvassing popular culture and dipping into *Game of Thrones* fan studies, to bolster his argument on radical empathy. The sheer scope of the book makes it a quintessential resource for newcomers to the field, while jargon-free analysis ensures it never sacrifices depth for breadth.

That said, *Fire and Snow* occasionally falls short of executing the social justice agendas set out in Chapters 4 and 5. Excepting Octavia Butler, the book largely ignores non-White authors and entirely overlooks N.K. Jemisin's three-in-a-row Hugo Award-winning *Inheritance Trilogy*. While demonstrating Tolkien's anti-fascism (passim) and explicit disavowal of anti-Semitism, the book relegates Tolkien's problematic stereotypically anti-Semitic characterization of his dwarves to a parenthetical (45, 39). And DiPaolo excoriates Peter Jackson for making "action movies" of Tolkien's cli-fi without acknowledging the movies' powerful emphases on moral character and the processing of historical grievances. Such oversights may stem from DiPaolo's breadth of coverage and reader-response methodology and detract little from an otherwise excellent book.

Climate-change deniers and alt-right conservatives will dislike DiPaolo's social justice agenda, but those recognizing the twin threats of environmental racism and climate change will find his work both erudite and engaging. A compelling anti-fascist argument for collective action against climate change by way of literary analysis, *Fire and Snow* is, ultimately, a book the Inklings would appreciate.

Notes

1. I.Q. Hunter, *British Trash Cinema* (2013), quoted in DiPaolo, *Fire and Snow*, 184) [↗](#)

Author Information

Alisa M. Schreibman

Alisa Michelle Schreibman is an Adjunct Professor of Humanities at Rocky Mountain College of Art+Design and Front Range Community College. Her current research examines golems, *dybbuks*, and other Jewish monsters at the intersections of fairy tale, memory, and magical realism.

[View all of Alisa M. Schreibman's articles.](#)

Article details

Alisa M Schreibman, "Review of 'Fire and Snow: Climate Fiction from the Inklings to 'Game of Thrones'" by Marc DiPaolo (State University of New York Press)," *Lateral* 9.1 (2020).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L9.1.18>

This content is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053